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ABSTRACT

Discussion supporting Latin study for those capable of learning the language focuses on its intrinsic interest, eminent practicality, and forward-looking curricular reforms. An approach to the study of English through Latin is commended in the article. (RL)

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BUT WHY LATIN - A TALK ON THE VALUE OF LATIN

By Lillian B. Lawler

People sometimes express wonderment that, in this day and age, Latin is still a very important subject in the high-school curriculum--and a very popular subject, at that. As a well-known advertisement reminds us, "Such popularity must be deserved." Let us see if we can find out some of the reasons.

From the point of view of the pupils themselves, perhaps we should place as our first reason:

I. Latin is interesting.

Deep down at the base of our own civilization and culture lies the civilization and culture of the ancient Romans, a picturesque, fascinating people who never fail to appeal to the imagination and romantic interest of boys and girls of high school age. This hardy, toga-clad nation which sent its representatives into the far island of Britain to reclaim our own remote and barbarous ancestors from painting themselves blue and offering human sacrifices, this race which taught us how to write and how to build roads and how to make laws, the people who built the Circus Maximus as the model for all the high school and college stadiums of this country--yes, the very people who induced us to put our wedding rings on the third finger of our left hands because they thought a nerve ran from that finger directly to the heart--these half-ancient, half-modern Romans have an intrinsic interest for the American boy and girl today. And Latin is the Romans' own language, the very words in which they wrote their history and their great literature, for posterity to read.

Furthermore, we find it to be true that many high-school boys and girls have a sort of detective instinct, if we may so call it, and get genuine pleasure out of unlocking the meaning of puzzling, complicated Latin sentences, even aside from their interest in the story told by the sentences.

Pick up any one of the modern Latin textbooks published in the last few years, and you will find in it a perfect treasure trove of interesting and instructive pictures and information on Roman life and civilization and its contribution to our own civilization, as well as much material bearing on the function of Latin in our English language of today.

Besides, the high-school student will tell you of a thousand externals that make Latin interesting to him--of his Latin club after school hours with its Latin plays, costumes, songs, games to help him learn Latin forms, bulletin boards, scrapbooks, slides, moving pictures, charts, models--all closely connected with his class work, and helping him use his hands, feet, eyes, ears, and tongue, along with his brain, in learning Latin and appreciating the Roman civilization.

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But even more important than interest, from the point of view of parents and teachers, is our second reason:

II. Latin is practical.

What? A dead language practical? Even as I say it, I seem to hear the echo of an old jingle:

All are dead who ever spoke it,
All are dead who ever wrote it,
All will die who ever learn it--
Blessed death! They surely earn it!

But on the heels of it comes an answer:

But the deadest dead of all who darn it,
Is old Smallbrain, who couldn't larn it!
So around he goes, and he blows and blows,
Down with Latin--consarn it!

Joking aside, however, we must face the fact that Latin is not nearly so dead as we might think--not even as a spoken language. The Roman Catholic Church still uses it extensively, for official documents and as the language for international church councils and other gatherings. Also, scholars travelling abroad and meeting others of different nationality occasionally use it as a common medium for the exchange of ideas. Yet, even if we grant that Latin as an ordinary, commonly-used tongue is dead, it must not be forgotten that it is very much alive in its modern forms of French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese--all of them Romance languages, or really dialects of the Roman language, Latin. In other words, French is merely Latin as the French people spoke and changed it, Spanish as the Spaniards spoke and changed it, Italian just modernized Latin, etc. The study of Latin, then, the original from which these others developed, makes the learning of the Romance languages a very easy matter indeed. In fact, a Latin student can often work out some Spanish or Italian by himself, merely because of its similarity to Latin.

"But," I hear you say, "I am not interested in Romance languages. My language is English." Very well. And did you know that more than half of the ordinary, every-day words in our newspapers, magazines, popular books, and every-day speech are Latin words taken over into English? And that almost all of the less common "big words" that bother us when we see them are of Latin origin, and that a little Latin helps us understand them instantly? I have seen high-school Latin students easily comprehend, in newspaper and magazine articles and in books, words like impecunious, circumloquacious, translucent, ultramundane, and others just as bad!

And have you ever stopped to think how the new words that are entering our language by the hundreds these days are made up?--the words for our new inventions, and for all the new phases of our civilization? They are almost all taken from Latin

or Greek words that describe the new thing. For instance, most of our words referring to electronics, atomic research, automation, television, radio, aeroplanes, space exploration, submarines, research in medicine, chemistry, electricity, agriculture--in short, in every scientific field--are Latin or Greek. And this is true not of English alone, but of every modern language in the civilized world. In a sense, then, Latin and Greek are the most living languages of all today, and together make up a real international scientific language; and some scientific journals are actually written in Latin.

As we all know, English is full of Latin abbreviations and phrases, too. For instance, what does i.e. mean? Or e.g., ibid., inst., op. cit., viz.? Or habeas corpus, or bona fide, or ad infinitum, or ex post facto, or terra firma, or per se, or vice versa, or sine die?

Latin can help in English spelling, also. In English, we slur a great many vowels and consonants of words from Latin, which in Latin pronunciation were very clear and distinct. For example, notice the vowel-plus-r sound in the following words: similar (-ar), certain (-er), virtue (-ir), attorney (-or), and urge (-ur). Webster's dictionary tells us to sound them all alike! In Latin the -ar is always -ar, the -er is -er, the -ir is -ir, the -or is -or, the -ur always -ur, sounded clearly. If a high-school student knows the derivation of a word, he is pretty sure to spell it correctly.

Furthermore, work with Latin and Latin literature can help one recognize and understand countless references to ancient people and gods and places and things that are found in English and American literature. The works of Shakespeare and Milton, Byron and Tennyson, Hawthorne and Longfellow, and of far lesser writers, as well, from early times down to our own day, show such references. It seems queer that we cannot read our own literature without a familiarity with an ancient literature; but so great has been the Latin influence on English that it is true. Even in our every-day speech we say: "The die is cast!" "A word to the wise is sufficient," "A sound mind in a sound body," "A rare bird," "hence these tears," "rich as Croesus," "When Greek meets Greek," "Dog days," "By jove," and a great many more--all of them originated in ancient times. The mottoes of a majority of the states, and of the United States as well, are Latin.

It has been discovered that Latin can do its bit even in the making of good citizens. Many of the Roman ideals of citizenship are ours, too, and the stories that the Romans have left us of great sacrifice of self for the good of the nation serve the same purpose in the education and training of the American boy that they did in the training of the Roman boy two thousand years ago.

Latin is popular, then, because it is practical. And thirdly, it is popular because:

III. The teaching of Latin has been consciously modernized to suit the needs of the present day.

The teaching of Latin today is an entirely different thing from what it was only a few years ago. Today systematic work in word study, Latin abbreviations, the connection of Latin and English grammar, the connection of Latin and English spelling, Roman civilization, and mythology, and their meaning for us here in America in the twentieth century, is an integral part of the Latin course--in other words, the Latin course of today touches the every-day lives of the pupils. And how do we get time for all this extra work? By neglecting the fundamentals of Latin? Not at all; rather, by leaving out, after scientific research, the many exceptions to rules, seldom-used forms, and odd constructions that high-school pupils once learned laboriously, but never met in their reading; and by reducing the amount of Caesar read, and substituting for it much simplified Latin by other authors, with subject matter rich in information about Roman civilization. As a matter of fact, unless Caesar is actually prescribed in the local course of study, a Latin teacher today can omit his works altogether.

But I seem to hear objections:

"You can't get anything out of Latin in less than four years!" somebody says. This objection has been positively disproved by the statistics of scientific investigators. As Latin is taught now, the boy or girl gets some positive, measurable good from each year in which he studies it. Many of the seniors in our universities who are going out with Latin as a major subject entered after having had just two years of Latin in high school.

"But," says someone else, "Why not study English itself, instead of studying Latin for English?" The answer is simple--it doesn't give nearly such good results. For example, it was found at Ohio University that pupils learned far more about English spelling in a Latin class than they did in a special English class that stressed spelling! The same thing is true of English grammar, English vocabulary, and numerous other phases of our language. Believe it or not, it is a proved fact. In 1646, Sir Thomas Browne said, "If elegancy still proceedeth, and English pens maintain that stream we have of late observed to flow from many, we shall within a few years be fain to learn Latin to understand English!" It seems to have come true.

"But," I hear again, "Latin students don't really learn to read Latin, and they know nothing of Latin literature. In their two years of Latin in high school the only author they get acquainted with is Caesar." As we have seen, this is no longer true. A typical second-year Latin text today contains passages from the historian Livy, the poet Horace, the fable-writer Phaedrus, the biographer Nepos, the playwright Publilius Syrus, the story-writers Valerius Maximus and Aulus Gellius, the philosophers Cicero and Seneca, the poet Vergil, the letter writer Pliny, and a score of others, including even medieval Latin writers.

"But," says a parent, "my boy wants to be an electrical engineer,"--or a lawyer, or a business man, or something else. "What good can Latin do him?" Yet a long list

of great statesmen, scientists, physicians, lawyers, and business men from all over the country have expressed in no uncertain terms their unanimous opinion that training in the classics is the very best preliminary training that a boy planning to enter their fields can have.

"But Latin is too hard," says another objector. "And it takes too much time." It is true that Latin is not easy; but a subject that can accomplish what Latin can and does accomplish is worth time and labor. However, we must not forget that many of the tales of the difficulty of Latin are exaggerated, and originate in the imagination of persons who cannot learn it. For it is true that there are people--many of them--who cannot "get" Latin, and should not try. In other words, Latin should never be required in a public high school, but it should be available for all who are capable of learning it. And yet, strange as it may seem, tests of educators have shown that even a student who fails in Latin gets some benefit from it for his English!

With the exception of students who actually are failing, the challenge of something difficult should not deter a bright, active, alert boy or girl for one moment. Nothing worth while comes without an effort. We must not coddle our boys and girls, nor let them coddle themselves, into habits of mental laziness. Nothing is better than a good, sound course in something like mathematics or Latin to teach a pupil to think for himself, clearly and accurately.

Why Latin, then? Because, to sum it all up briefly, Latin is one of the most interesting, most practical, most truly modern subjects taught in American schools today.